How Integrative Thinking Promotes Innovative Problem-Solving

It's commonplace in business (and life) to face seemingly opposed, unsatisfactory choices. In many situations, the best answer is to do neither. Instead, effective leaders draw upon what Roger Martin in his classic book, The Opposable Mind, describes as integrative thinking, and harness the constructive tension between the two ideas to generate a unique and more attractive option. Your ability to develop and exercise your critical thinking skills in the form of integrative thinking might save your firm and career.

A Case Study—Integrative Thinking in Action:

A general manager pondered next steps for her technology business unit. After four years of a tug-of-war battle around pricing cuts and new product rollouts with an unrelenting competitor, neither firm had gained ground versus the other. To this general manager, the situation was one of mutually assured destruction, as both firms were navigating declining margins and resource strains.

As she stared at the latest ideas for pricing promotions proposed by her sales team along with the most recent new product investment ideas from the product group, she realized it was beyond time to come up with a different approach. Price cutting was addictive and self-destructive. And innovating your way out of a pitched battle with a tenacious competitor was an exercise in futility.

Fast-forward several months and the general manager had her idea, and it didn't involve price cutting or attempting to out-innovate the competitor. During a series of client visits, the GM and her team members deliberately focused on studying the bigger picture of client operations (beyond her unit's immediate products), and what they saw pointed to some creative new ideas.

Instead of narrowly focusing on identifying improvements to existing offerings, this GM saw a window to help clients solve a more significant set of business problems around systems integration and data management. The idea to transform from a hardware/software supplier to a systems integrator was conceived during these visits.

Initially, corporate management—and a few of her team members—thought she had lost it. Their refrain was: "What business do we have serving as an integrator and a consulting firm? Give us plan to sell more systems and software."
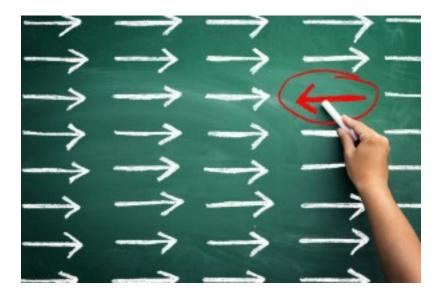
Our GM understood the unit sales driven "dominant logic" of her corporate management and team members. So, she embarked upon a test case with a few of the large franchise owners in her customer groups. The results were eye-opening for everyone.

The customers were initially surprised at the offer to get involved in larger and one-degree of separation activities, but they recognized the sincerity of the offer. Before long, our GM's firm was helping the clients create specifications for new systems and outline operational

changes that eliminated bottlenecks and improved the speed of information flow. To the outside observer, these efforts with incongruous with the mission to sell more systems. And then something funny began to happen with purchases of the GM's products—they went up, along with the margins.

The community was so impressed with the investment and results from the GM, and her firm, they began almost reflexively purchasing the firm's systems. Price negotiation disappeared, and the competitor was more often not even considered in the process. Jump-ahead a few years and this strategy was so successful, the formerly pesky competitor exited the market, unable to gain any ground with typical price or product development approaches.

Score one for integrative thinking!

Integrative Thinking as a Habit for Successful Leaders:

The most successful organizational leaders I've encountered, including the one in the case study, are relentless about seeking out the counter-intuitive approach to their business challenges. They resist the rush to choose between traditional tactics and instead strive to reframe difficult situations as, "What if?" type opportunities.

In every circumstance where I've observed the application of integrative thinking, it didn't happen without the individual silencing the reflexive, pattern-matching portion of the brain and creating opportunities for new ideas to flood the system.

The GM in the case study indicated to me that she would never have conceived of the idea without breaking the habit of asking customers about their satisfaction with her unit's products. Instead, she and her team members stepped back and just observed. What they

saw convinced them the customers had much bigger fish to fry than worrying about her unit's offerings. While her unit was focused on creating the next version, running the latest price promotion, or building a new, low-cost product, the customers were barely treading water trying to tie systems together and use the data to serve their customers.

This concept of stepping away from the perceived visible choices—cut costs or innovate faster or both—and striving to understand the real burdens or real issues in the situation is a hallmark of integrative thinkers.

5 Tools to Promote Integrative Thinking in Your Organization

The dicey issue for the topic of integrative thinking is in how to teach people to break the back of their pattern-matching approach to problems. In my experience, the following tactics have yielded remarkable results for those striving to jump-start individual and group integrative thinking:

1. Learning to hit the pause button on common responses to problems

Organizations run in cycles. From the annual strategic planning offsite (anachronistic in this era) to budgeting to the annual cycle of industry trade-shows, promotions and company and customer meetings, the pattern repeats while the world changes. As a leader, learn to recognize and challenge this pattern. Your use of "Why?" coupled with, "How might we change and do something unique and valuable with that money/effort?"

2. Applying multiple framing techniques to problems

How a situation is framed determines the type and aggressiveness of the proposed solutions. Groups will almost invariably offer a different set of solutions for a situation framed as a problem versus framing it as an opportunity. The next time you are presented with a problem that seems to point to two less-than-great choices, reframe the issue and develop alternative solutions. "*OK, what if we framed this situation as an opportunity? How would we respond to create the best outcomes for us/our stakeholders?*"

3. Association exercises

This technique is one of my personal favorites to help break the back of traditional thinking. For example, if you are striving to respond to low and declining customer service ratings, identify an unlike firm in an industry far away and ask, "How would X firm strengthen our customer service?" Challenge a cross-functional team to explore how this far-removed firm does such a great job and then look for ideas to apply to your environment. The goal isn't so much emulation as it is idea-prompting.

4. Anthropologist approaches

As outlined in the case above, cultivating the ability to objectively observe situations offers a potential treasure trove of ideas and insights. Designers are experts at studying individuals in their own elements. The design-firm IDEO famously studied the use of shopping carts in grocery stores in a made-for-tv example of how the shopping cart might be completely redesigned in the now dated but still fascinating "Deep Dive." In another example, a software firm specializing in data management software observed "a day in the life of data" and quickly discovered a number of costly bottlenecks and manual processes that when automated saved significant amounts of time and manual labor.

5. Parallel thinking techniques

I am an avowed lover of Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats approach to parallel thinking. The emphasis is on harnessing the collective gray-matter of groups by helping them focus on a single issue or topic at a time, instead of the usual conflux of opinions, facts, political agendas, and emotions that overpower most group discussions.

Recognition of the Need to Think Differently is the First-Step

While there are many tools to promote creative thinking and problem-solving, the most important issue is recognizing the need to think differently about a situation. Seemingly common-sensical, it's actually challenging in practice to pause and then put the effort forth to explore alternatives. Know that your pattern-grooved brain and the dominant logic in your firm are big obstacles standing in your way. In a world undergoing systemic change, it pays to put in the effort.

The Bottom-Line for Now:

Ask a group of people the behaviors and characteristics of effective leaders, and I guarantee you will hear some version of the same laundry list over and over again. Oddly, few if any will highlight critical thinking as one of those key success factors. In my opinion, it's the most important of all.

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Art Petty is a coach, speaker and workshop presenter focusing on helping professionals and organizations learn to survive and thrive in an era of change. When he is not speaking, Art serves senior executives, business owners and high potential professionals as a coach and strategy advisor. Additionally, Art's books are widely used in leadership development programs. To learn more or discuss a challenge, contact Art.